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THE ENGLISH ASSOCIATION

Pamphlet No. 72

Shakespeare
Politics and Politicians

BY

H. B. CHARLTON

April 1929

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SHAKESPEARE, POLITICS, AND POLITICIANS

(An address given on 25 January 1929 to the Leeds Branch of the English Association, and now set down, without attempt to turn spoken words into a piece of writing, as closely as memory and the notes of an auditor allow of accuracy in the recording of an extempore discourse.)

IN these democratic days, there would appear to be singular tactlessness in any attempt to do honour to Shakespeare's name by recalling his political opinions. There is nothing in him the average man of to-day finds harder to forgive than his contempt for the populace. The extremest reactionary of the Junior Constitutional in our time, even at his whitest heat of bolshephobia, would at least distinguish the people from the mob. But for Shakespeare, in his blindness, democracy was simple ochlocracy, and a tribune of the people could be no other than a demagogue. Jack Cade is his notion of the popular leader whose platform is the people's discontent. Much more exasperating than Shakespeare's indifference to social and economic problems in Cade's programme is the antipathy which permits him to revel in a grossly burlesque portrait of the man. The politics of the artist who depicted Cade are prejudices, it would seem, and not principles. Even as prejudices, they strike one as considerably in arrear of time. A Roman patrician might perhaps have looked on the world in this way, and felt no need to justify the instinct prompting him to do so. But such assumptions seem much less natural in the mind of a provincial burgess of sixteenth-century England. Yet Shakespeare's politics are indeed very like to those of Coriolanus. Cade is disqualified as a legislator, because laws coming from a mouth reeking so strongly of toasted cheese as does his, will be but stinking law. To Coriolanus, the rank-scentedness of the many is no less a political disablement than is their mutability. Both Shakespeare and Coriolanus see nothing but anarchy in democracy—

where gentry, title, wisdom,
Cannot conclude but by the yea and no
Of general ignorance—

the very phrasing, for what it explicitly says of gentry and title as political assets, and for what it implicitly assumes in associating wisdom with a titled gentry and ignorance with the rest, is in the true aristocratic tradition. There can be no doubt at all that so far as Shakespeare had anything we may call polling-booth politics,

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they were such that even a backwoodsman of to-day would hardly dare to whisper his sneaking assent.

Is there, then, nothing to be urged in excuse for recalling Shakespeare's politics but the antiquary's delight to rifle a benevolent oblivion's hoard? Granting that what Shakespeare thought about politics hardly appears worthy of more than a few minutes' attention from the far more politically expert man in the streets of our own day, is that all that is worth the saying?

The problem is part of a much bigger question: what, in fact, does it matter what any poet thinks about anything? The answer would appear to be simple: it matters exactly nothing, unless the poet, besides being a poet, happens to possess a capacity for thinking so far above that of other men, that his thoughts are likely to be of more worth than theirs. But to look to him, merely as a poet, for a valid system of moral or religious or political ideas, is to look for turnips on a rose-tree. As far as sheer thought is concerned, poets are less remarkable for uttering what no one has thought before, than for saying what everybody has been thinking, but what nobody has hitherto said so effectively—'what oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed'. Maybe there is no department of life in which the poet who regards this as his function is of more use to the world than in politics. Virgil, for instance, scarcely has anything coherent enough to call a political theory. But he stood for peace, for cosmopolitan understanding, for lenity, and for justice:

pacificque imponere morem,
Parcere subiectis et debellare superbos—

lines our own James I took from him for a motto. They do not make Virgil a political philosopher. But in these democratic days, when we are all governors, what really matters is the extent to which such humane commonplaces of politics are part of the inheritance of every citizen of the world. It is Virgil's power as a poet to wrap these generous truisms of corporate life in phrases which haunt the minds of men and hover about their lips,

victorque virum volitare per ora.

But the merit is Virgil the poet's, not Virgil the thinker's.

Poets, of course, are not to be denied the common human right to think, and, so far as they may think systematically, the privilege of having a complete philosophy of their own. But, if to philosophize is to build up an organized system of the universe, the poet is less fitted than any other mortal to be a philosopher. The philosopher's way of resolving experience into a philosophy is a process the main stages of which are familiar to all of us who have stumbled across Euclid's *pons asinorum*. Without passion, without

prejudice, unaffected by fancy and unmoved by sentiment, we must regard the angles *ABC* and *ACB* solely in the light of pure reason. A violent liking for *ACB* or a strong distaste for *ABC* would inevitably distort the argument and nullify the search for scientific and philosophic truth. But the poet is a poet precisely because these sensuous and non-rational instruments of his personality are stronger in him than in the rest of us. A sparrow pecking in the sand sets every nerve in Keats's body vibrating. The sight of a daisy affects philosophers and commonplace folk like ourselves very much as it affected Peter Bell. It stirs a Wordsworth or a Burns to ecstasy. The more poet a poet is, the less is he capable of absorbing experience impersonally and dispassionately. He cannot stifle his emotions and suppress his imagination; he cannot give pure reason an absolute sway. It is physically impossible for him to let experience slowly submit itself to his ratiocinative faculty and thence come forth as a formula, a systematized philosophy. It must invade every fibre of his being, run through every vein in his body, and ooze out of his fingers as a poem. What a poet thinks is of little moment, compared with what he feels and what he sees; and if what he sees and feels about is a creation of his own rather than of nature's, it is still no creation of his reason, but of his imagination.

There is, of course, nothing novel in this distinction between thinker and poet. Friends and enemies of poetry have always recognized it, and their unanimity is curiously illustrated by the common fortune of a famous passage in *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*. The lover of poetry quotes with ecstatic applause the lines describing the poet's eye in a fine frenzy rolling, as his imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, and his pen, turning them to shapes, gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name. But how seldom is it remembered that these lines in the speech of Theseus are part of an attack on poetry, and that their function in the economy of the play clearly indicates Shakespeare's endorsement of the indictment. The poet is grouped with the lunatic and the lover, because, all compact of imagination, he apprehends far more than cool reason comprehends or than common sense gives warrant to. A very homely simile makes it plain how serious a disadvantage is such apprehension and lack of cool reason, in a world where even bare survival depends on the faculty for distinguishing, immediately, certainly, and unflinchingly, between bushes and bears.

Neither friend nor foe, it is clear, expects an artist to be endowed with cool reason. Why, therefore, go to him for cool thinking, and for the ordered system of thought the thinker produces as his

philosophy? It would appear the most futile of errands. Yet everybody does it. There are volumes devoted to Mr. Shaw and to Mr. Galsworthy in which the bulk of the space expounds their social philosophy, often with scarcely a recognition that each of them is primarily an artist. Still, it is a no less fundamental article in the wisdom of Shakespeare's comedies, that the habits which horse-sense or mother-wit have inculcated in mankind are the chief safeguards of the race's sanity. There must be some good cause for our general expectation of a philosophy from the poet.

Better than any other form of art, drama offers a mode of reconciling the two apparently irreconcilable points of view, although by its very nature it tends in the first instance to obscure the fundamental issue. Drama introduces men talking and thinking as men do talk and think, and each of its characters may have his theory of this or that form of life or even of the whole of it, and so the matter of a play may be chock-full of more or less explicit systems of thought. If the dramatist, besides being an artist, is also in his unartistic moments a thinker, these views he allows his people to expound may be well worth our concern. But the general probability is that the more he is a thinker, the less will he be an artist. What he has of his own to give to the world is not what he has comprehended of life. His gift is, in the phrase of *A Midsummer-Night's Dream*, to reveal what he has apprehended of it. Yet drama requires a kind of apprehension which, in quality and in scope, is, in fact, a sort of philosophy, a sense or a vision of the conditions which control the life of man in the world, or even, indeed, in the universe. A tragedy is a great tragedy because it sweeps to its ending with the conviction that life being what it is, such fate is the inevitable lot of such and such a person. The art of the tragic dramatist is the art of complete self-effacement, so that he may exonerate himself entirely from all complicity in his hero's death. When the ending is arbitrary, when instinctively the onlooker feels a desire to intervene and save the hero, as when the voice in the gallery urges Romeo to wait a minute before stabbing himself, for Juliet is but apparently dead—when these sensations spring from the course of a tragedy, the author is failing to convince us that he has grasped the immutable laws of life; is only intimating to us that he has seen an accident. Not even in the lightest comedy is the dramatist given licence to move his figures here and there at his mere whim. The comic dramatist chooses his hero, and since he has covenanted to produce a comedy, he seeks from his hero a pledge that come what may in the progress of the action, he will be alive and flourishing at the end of it. The play begins: the hero encounters his fellow-men and the common conditions of existence.

He meets difficulties and obstacles—no conflict, no play. But as a comic hero his one duty is ultimately to triumph over them, and, of course, to do so with some appearance of probability. Wherefore the dramatist must endow his hero with the personality or the temperament or the mind or the faculty for mastering common circumstance; and, writing a comedy, he is in fact embodying implicitly his apprehension of the clue to happiness in life, to success in living, his worldly wisdom, which is substantially his philosophy of life. But such apprehension is unconsciously woven into the texture of his play. The deeper it is, the less has it occupied the author's rational consciousness. It is an artist's apprehension, not a thinker's conclusions. His tragedies will ensue from his apprehension of life's ultimate order, his comedies from his apprehension of the prevailing laws of living.

And so, with this long prolusion and delay, to Shakespeare's politics; setting aside finally all concern with what views he may consciously have held on any political programme or on any particular aspect of the art of government. Is it possible in any of his plays to find anything which as an artist he had apprehended of the conditions governing the life political? His tragedies are glimpses of individual man as a nursling of immortality, his vision of the ways of God with man: his comedies are his imaginative experience of the same individual in his domestic and social relationship with other members of civilized society. But by pure chance there was in Shakespeare's day a type of theatrical entertainment which was neither tragedy nor comedy, neither focused mainly on the life eternal, nor on the life private, domestic, and social. There was the so-called History or Chronicle Play.

Perhaps no one but Shakespeare wrote the History Play proper. Others made plays on historical themes. Tragedy from its beginnings had demanded an historical warrant for its action and its heroes; invented tales from novelettes, like the story of *Romeo and Juliet*, were revolutionary novelties. But almost all serious plays on historical subjects are tragedies, not history-plays. In *Richard III*, it is the ruin of the man Richard which is the motive; and that his ruin is effected through his kingship merely indicates that history is the accidental form and tragedy the essential substance of the drama. So, too, in *Richard II*.

But to fob off the clamour for a history-play by providing an historical tragedy was to run away from an aesthetic problem. In its beginnings, the history-play was nothing but a chronicle panorama. A wave of exuberant national sentiment cried out for such stimulus as visible reminders of England's past could give it. The theatre, not as a temple of drama, but as a market-place for

spectacle, was well enough qualified for this sort of cinematographic depiction. It could stage scenes from chronicles. But in so doing, it was catering primarily for a political, and not for an artistic, demand. It was exercising and fostering patriotism. Hence the pageantry of the chronicle play, and its undramatic structure, although, of course, by the accident of its environment, it took to itself freely incidental dramatic scenes, comic or tragic, as episodes in the spectacle. So, in the Cade incidents of *Henry VI*, or the Talbot episode, for a moment the quality of interest becomes in some sense mainly comic or tragic, and the audience is given something of the conventional appeal of comedy or of tragedy, by a playlet within a panorama. But the whole matter of *Henry VI* has no dramatic form. There is no dominant interest, recognizable as a dramatic interest, to hold the audience in continuous suspense.

It seemed as if the political emotion which gave birth to the chronicle play was to remain a manifestation of life, of which the dramatist as a dramatist could only take partial cognizance, either by diverting it to an occasion for comedy or for tragedy, or by giving it free stage play though with only one or two articles, and those the most mechanical, of the many and complex instruments which in full concert make up the art of drama.

The problem was too much for all the Elizabethans but Shakespeare. His *King John* stands at the parting of the ways. It is neither chronicle play nor tragedy; nor is it a history play. It is a chronicle play leaning to tragedy for as much artistic discipline as will give it the semblance of dramatic shape; but it is unwilling to pay the price of such dramatic organization by sacrificing as much of chronicle-spectacle as *Richard III* had done. Indeed, the chronicle elements preponderate. The long first scene of the second act (act one, scene two in the Folio) flouts every rudimentary principle of drama to get more and more characteristic spectacle. Its very stage directions are an ample index to its undramatic quality. The scene is before Angiers. 'Enter Philip King of France, Lewis Dauphin, Austria, Constance, Arthur.' The French and Austrian armies are meeting to pledge themselves as allies in Arthur's cause against his unnatural uncle, English John; and so the boy, and therefore his mother and their domestic attendants are brought into the open field to participate in this ceremony. The alliance made, the armies at once train their cannon against the town of Angiers. Philip, swearing the proper desperate oaths, is just about to give order for the first cannonade, when we are reminded that the ladies are still present. Constance suggests a pause, in the hope that the post may bring an offer of peace from John. Even as she speaks, with a promptitude her

words have quite unnecessarily converted into an entirely undramatic coincidence, the messenger arrives: 'Enter Chattilion'. His message is exciting. The English are here with their armies, and also, strangely, with their royal women-folk, the queen-mother, who has a special commission from the English War Office, an Ate to stir her son to blood and strife, and the Lady Blanch, who is presumably seconded from hospital work at home to keep her aunt company. The message is interrupted by the churlish English drums: 'Drum beats', and in a trice, 'Enter King of England, Bastard, Queene, Blanch, Pembroke, and others', who constitute the English army. The rival kings more or less officially state each his own country's case. But at once the women break into the parley with a very unladylike turn of vituperation, and such congenial entertainment is taken up by subsidiary members of the English corps, the Bastard, and Lady Blanch. Nothing can stop the women's tongues, until fortunately another diversion occurs—'Trumpet sounds. Enter a citizen upon the walles'. And so, another formal parley. England and France bid for the favour of the city. But the solemnity of the occasion calls for relief; there is more back-chat from the subalterns of either side. The upshot is a rousing decision to fight, and the rival armies at once fall into battle-station. Presumably the battle is fought at once, for without interruption in the text, 'Here after excursions, Enter the Herald of France with Trumpets to the gates' to announce a French victory. The words are taken out of his mouth by an English officer: 'Enter English Herald with Trumpet', informing us that a whole hot malicious day has gone since the decision to fight, and that the lusty English, all with purpled hands dyed in the dying slaughter of their foes, have won a complete victory. The citizen tells them both that they are liars: he has been an interested spectator of the conflict, and adjudicates it a draw. The impasse is broken through by a fresh incident. 'Enter the two Kings with their powers at severall doores,' to embark on further recriminations, which appear to be leading to another bout in battle. But the Bastard has a brain-wave. Let France and England join in temporary truce and demolish Angiers. The plan commends itself immediately to the military heads, and is to be executed at once. But the citizen sees now that he and his fellows are in a pretty pickle, and his danger inspires him to a brilliant diplomatic proposal—which reminds us that still somewhere or other in the thick of the bleeding combatants, the ladies are disporting themselves. 'Why', he asks, 'should not "that lovely maid" Blanch marry with Lewis the Dauphin?' A bit of match-making immediately excites the sympathy of the beldame Elinor, and, at

her instigation, John finds that Philip is not unwilling. The Dauphin is brought forward and invited 'to look in the lady's face', to see if he will have her. He endures in an instant all the sentimental throbs of romantic love; and lest the marriage should seem entirely one of convenience, there is a direction—'Whisper with Blanch.' Palpably, this is a very restricted opportunity for a first-class wooing, and not too suitable a place for it, in full view of lately contending armies and interested citizens. But clearly there is magic in the sweet nothings he 'whispers with Blanch'. All that remains is the formal drawing up of the marriage settlement, and the ratification of the terms of peace—except for the insertion of a line to assure us that the fun is not really over: the peace is specious; and one of the ladies has withdrawn to her tent to mope and so guarantee a resumption of hostilities. To round off such a gallimaufry, the stage is at length cleared of all but the Bastard, to allow this flagrant immoralist to draw the moral of the whole scene.

Such is the stuff which is largely characteristic of the substance of *King John*. Obviously, it is not easily amenable to dramatic shaping, however well it may supply the excitement of chronicle-spectacle. At many points there are clear attempts to graft on to it the traditional themes of tragedy. Elinor and Constance are cast to play Senecan roles as harbingers of destiny. Blanch is provided with the conventional dramatic conflict between love and country. The barons of England have to face a recognized tragic dilemma and choose between their sense of honour and loyalty to their king. Above all, there is the incident of Hubert and Arthur, which, if it falls short in the pity and fear of tragedy, certainly excites more than enough of the pathos and horror of tragedy's popular substitute, melodrama. But these episodic diversions in the manner of drama only emphasize the essentially undramatic sweep of the whole matter. Its insufficiency is plain to be seen in the technical career of its nominal hero, King John, and in the circumstances of his final catastrophe. As a conventional tragic hero he must finally die. But his death at the hands of a monk fulfils no dramatic expectancy and satisfies no awakened sense of inevitable doom. What it very clearly does excite and satisfy, however, is a contemporary political sentiment, the anti-papalism which was momentarily a form of English patriotism; and, of course, it adopts another equally un- or extra-artistic principle, that, namely, of conformity with recorded fact. John's death is thus determined by historical and political motives. No less within the play is his life ordained by the same powers. Substantially, he forfeits his place as a technical hero, and the first call on our theatrical interest is won from him by the Bastard.

At first glance, the Bastard's qualifications to offer himself as hero seem grotesque. A similar figure used in a similar theatrical function in our own day, Dick Dudgeon in *The Devil's Disciple*, only manages to bring off so audacious a technical coup by revealing in himself and in his author vast reserves of sentimentality. But Shakespeare refused Falconbridge every opportunity to obtain sentimental credit by a display of skill in the luring of women. Worse still, he gave him merely an appetite for them. The Bastard appears, indeed, to be entirely unfitted to exercise any of the spells by which a sufficient heroism is to be purchased. He comes to us first of all in a most questionable sort. His attitude towards the circumstance of his bastardy is perhaps more ribald than immoral; but his flippancy in discourse with his mother about her sin—'your fault was not your folly', 'with all my heart I thank you for my father'—is a flagrant instance of his brutish pride in flouting constraints imposed by common decency on ordinary moral beings. Throughout the play his humour has always a good deal of the beast in it, as when, in his gibes at Austria, he says:

Sirrah, were I at home,
At your den, sirrah, with your lioness,
I would set an ox-head to your lion's hide,
And make a monster of you.

Maybe it is this bullishness of his which is the source of his attraction. Perhaps it is because it goes some way towards John Bullishness. Boisterousness of animal spirits and a riotous disregard of proprieties may, of course, express themselves in a low and vigorous sort of humour sufficient to make their owner entertaining. But Falconbridge is more than entertaining in the play. His title is not merely honorary; he establishes his dramatic worth by determining the action of the play. He becomes in fact a pledge of victory for his side. Despicable as he may be as a private individual, he is a national asset. It is in virtue of this capacity that he looms so largely in the play. He is a rudimentary John Bull, a bulwark of England. His technical promotion to the middle stage, and the pushing of John into the wings, marks the transition from tragedy to the history play, a transition, however, which only makes tentative steps in *King John*. But what ultimately will distinguish the history-play from tragedy is beginning to appear. Comedy and tragedy are concerned with the eternal or ephemeral fate of individual man. The history-play is concerned with communities of men, and primarily with nations. The real hero of the English history-play is England.

But just as the author of tragedy, moving his hero from predicament to predicament and at last to his ruin, weaves into the design of his play his apprehension of the ultimate forces which

sway the life of individual man in our universe, so in the history play. At its beginning England is presented in such and such a condition. As the action proceeds, there are changes in the protagonist's welfare; and at the end, if the author is a dramatist with a dramatist's genius and apprehension, the state of affairs ensues as the inevitable outcome of what has gone before. But to give such conviction to his ending the dramatist must have apprehended the fundamental principles conditioning the form of life he is displaying. In the history play, it is the welfare of a nation as a nation; that is, it is a specifically political interest. The ups and downs of England's national fortune in *King John* are not presented as a succession of chances. They are visible effects of operant causes shown in the action which is the play. Shakespeare's picture of Falconbridge is his first sketch of the forces which sway to its advantage the destiny of a nation. He is Shakespeare's first portrait of an unofficial statesman, a natural politician, a realization in untrammelled circumstance of such a figure as Bolingbroke would have been if he had not been called upon to play a part in tragedy.

Falconbridge does not hide the grounds of his political worth. More than once he himself expounds his own guiding principles; and the actions he instigates in the play are direct expressions of these principles. Expediency is his watchword: 'commodity the bias of the world.' An eye for the main chance, and utter immunity from every moral or decent scruple which might trammel one's freedom to perform the expedient act expeditiously: that is the secret of policy. Hence the enormous political advantage Falconbridge's unmoral personality is to him. It is he who suggests the entirely immoral but thoroughly effective truce between France and England for the reduction of Angiers, and he is delighted with its Machiavellian sufficiency—'smacks it not something of the policy?' The most cunning article of the truce he does not himself propose: it is a chance suggestion. But only he has the political acumen to recognize it. His scheme had been that 'by east and west' English and French should mount their battering cannon against Angiers. But the tactical disposition of their forces is determined by the leaders quite casually. John chooses the west, Austria the north, and France the south; and Falconbridge's aside as he hears the plan is ample testimony to his political genius:

O prudent discipline. From north to south:
Austria and France shoot in each other's mouth.
I'll stir them to it.

He knows that the artillery of his day is variable in its range-finding; and rejoices that by inadvertent casualties there will be so many fewer French and Austrians to fight when the main

conflict is resumed. Only once in the whole play, and that towards the end, in sheer horror at Arthur's supposed murder, does Falconbridge utter a sentiment which appears to presuppose a conscience. But it is a politically safe sentiment; and perhaps, realizing how indispensably English Falconbridge had become, Shakespeare for common decency's sake lent him a proper moral cloak.

It is no doubt dangerous to attribute validity to opinions deduced from an artist's apprehension in a play which is only intermittently and dubiously artistic. The impression of Falconbridge's unscrupulousness as the main instrument of his political efficiency may proceed not from Shakespeare's intuitive and imaginative grasp of the life political: it may be no more than a casual prejudice. Even so, there is no room for doubt that his habitual view of the art of diplomacy was that it was an immoral game. Kings break faith upon commodity. John's pseudo-judicial determination of the Falconbridge heritage is a farcical travesty of justice:

My mother's son did get your father's heir;
Your father's heir must have your father's land.

And when the Dauphin has a faintly moral reluctance to enter into certain complicated political fetches, it is characteristically a high ecclesiastic who reproaches him for being so green and fresh in the ways of the world.

But if *King John*, by permitting a distinction between the craft of policy and the art of government, allows no unassailable ground for attributing to Shakespeare a distinctly contemptuous view of statesmen and statecraft, his two fully developed history-plays, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*, make such an escape impossible. They are perhaps the only perfect specimens of a dramatic type which, even in an age of creative dramatists, only Shakespeare's genius could invent. They are not chronicle-pageants: they are not tragedies, nor are they comedies, though they come closer to comedy than to other recognized types, and indeed curiously so, since the traditional affinities of the chronicle play had been with tragedy. They are history-plays. A better name would be political plays, for they are plays in which the prevailing dramatic interest is in the fate of a nation. Since that is their nature, there will be in them much of what Shakespeare's insight had apprehended of the forces which shape a nation's destiny.

The plot of both of them is specifically political, and the nominal hero of each is elected to the office in his capacity as a political agent, a wielder of government. To an Elizabethan, the welfare of England was in the hands of its sovereign. These two history-plays are representations of two kings, each contributing his particular

service to the good of his country by virtue of his gifts, his principles, and his personality. At the end of them, England is what it has become in each, because this or that trait in its king has visibly produced these political consequences. They are, psychologically, studies in kings; but, dramatically, they are views of kingship.

It is plain to see what makes Henry IV an efficient governor. As a man, he is unattractive, cold, secretive. He can suppress or hide every tremor of personal sentiment and of natural instinct. Touches of nature are interspersed to diversify the portrait—the conflict, for instance, in Henry between the father and the king, and the elemental human torments such as sleeplessness, attacking the natural man through the strain imposed by the statesman. But these not only add lifelikeness to the picture; they emphasize the dramatic theme. It is Henry's political virtue that, up to the limit of all but simple physical necessity, he can always subdue the man to the official. He cloaks even the most natural impulses; on both occasions, for instance, when he talks as a father with his son, he has carefully secured privacy by dismissing all his attendants and counsellors. His life has been governed by policy. He has been eminently successful as a politician; he has led his country to larger prosperity. The public benefit ensuing from his achievement is clear in the sequence of events which make the play. Less obvious, but no less certain, is Henry's own single-mindedness in directing his policy to public good. When, unheard by the world, he is in intimate discourse with his offending son, his obsessing fear is that his son's dissipation will spell ruin for England:

the fifth Harry from curb'd licence plucks
The muzzle of restraint, and the wild dog
Shall flesh his tooth on every innocent.
O my poor kingdom, sick with civil blows!

The principles of policy by which Henry has conferred so much good on the nation are plain to be seen. Absolute expediency and resolute pragmatism. 'Are these things then necessities? Then let us meet them like necessities.' This, of course, means the suspension of all moral considerations except in so far as they may be tools of expediency. 'Nothing can seem foul to those that win.' The natural and the moral man must be overcome; all impulses of conscience and all promptings of humane instinct must be rigorously controlled, so that the perfect official, the ideal civil servant, may emerge. Such a victory has Henry won over himself.

The sources of his political worth are thrown into clearer light by dramatic comparison and contrast. He is set over against Hotspur, who, as a man, has the irresistible attractiveness of high-spirited nobility:

no braver gentleman
 More active-valiant or more valiant-young,
 More daring or more bold, is now alive
 To grace this latter age with noble deeds.

But because he is so much at the mercy of his human and manly instincts, he is a complete political failure. He cannot govern, because he cannot control and organize even himself. Officially, he is a hare-brained Hotspur, governed by a spleen, or by a romantic sentiment. How complete is his failure to participate in corporate scheming is apparent even in his demeanour as a husband. Luckily for him, marriage is not entirely a political association, and may even yet be held fast by links of purely personal preference. Hotspur's shortcomings in regard to domestic strategy are insufficient to fracture a union welded so firmly by the devotion of a wife so strongly under the spell of his personality. But his heedlessness as she fondly and lengthily inquires for the cause of his distemperature; his indifference to her anxieties; his spasmodic awakening from brooding abstraction, but only to summon a servant for information about posts and horses; above all, the casual callousness of the notice he deigns in the end to give to her—'What say'st thou, my lady?'—these are enough to indicate Hotspur's ineptitude even in the politics of domesticity. He is always so passionately himself, and so enthusiastically the man, that he can never conduct himself as the unfailing official.

Falstaff, at first a mere unhistorical intruder strangely allowed entry into a history play, quickly asserts his right to a main role in the play's dramatic idea. He is the marvellous offspring of Shakespeare's full perception of the artistic affinity between history play and comedy. Comedy approaches life as something to be lived, and the living of it is a practical art. Falstaff's problem as a comic character is to maintain the corporation of Sir John. His task is of an order similar to Henry's political occupation to maintain the community of England. Falstaff's principles are Henry's, applied to the domain of private life. He fights no longer than he sees reason; for a comic hero endangers his professional qualification as a comic hero whenever he risks his life and hazards an uncovenanted tragic ending. He is neither brave nor cowardly, neither truthful nor a liar; for such moral distinctions do not exist in his world. Virtue for him is merely the ability to survive and succeed by the exercise of his capacity for overcoming all obstacles and for extricating himself from all dangers. Wit is his instrument, as a closely allied form of intellectual ingenuity, craft, is Henry's. And Falstaff's banishment of honour from his scale of values is no less necessary to his efficiency than is Henry's oblivion of it to his.

But of course Falstaff's task to be a man moving triumphantly amongst men does not require him to renounce his manhood. Indeed he must preserve in particular its primary elements, the qualities which pertain to the flesh. There are no more universal touches of nature; and they make Falstaff heartily welcome to all mankind. Henry has nothing but success in office to give him a hold on our regard. He remains outside our affection, a perfect politician.

In popular estimation Shakespeare's Henry V is probably a more perfect king than Henry IV. Admittedly he is a far more likeable fellow—once he has ceased to explain his wild oats. And what enterprises of kingship he undertakes he performs no less successfully than did his father. But Shakespeare can only allow him to purchase our personal affection by considerably reducing his duties as a king. His father had to exercise the whole art of government, maintaining peace at home and securing glory abroad. It was in the more exacting office of governing at home that his subtlest craft was needed. But Hal is largely relieved of these routine trials, and for the most part his kingship is circumscribed to military leadership. At the head of his army, in embarkation, in siege, and in battle, he treads the surest of traditional ways to popular acclamation. He is a great commander whose greatness as a king is tacitly and sentimentally assumed. In a field-command he can keep so much of the humanity he would perforce have to leave outside the door of civil office. Soldiers are much more obviously human than clerks of the Treasury.

But on the rare occasions when Hal is called upon for a definitely political decision, are the factors determining political wisdom different from what they were in his father's case? Hal's mode of leading his army to victory is his most obvious national asset. But it was, so to speak, a secondary achievement, and the good it did was entirely dependent on the prior decision to make war on France. The first scene of *Henry V*—a scene which critics curiously pass by—unmistakably deprives Hal of all personal credit for that decision. He is trapped into declaration of war by the machinations of a group of men whose sole and quite explicit motive is to preserve their own revenues; and the political implication is more flagrant in that these men are an ecclesiastical synod. Hal, in fact, owes his political achievement, not as did his father, to his own insight, but rather to something so near to intellectual dullness that it permits of his being jockeyed into his opportunities. He can be saved from such imputation only by the assumption that he saw through the bishops' subtlety and quietly used them as an excuse to embark on a foreign war with the idea of securing domestic

peace, even as his father in his dying words had advised him to do. But such Machiavellian astuteness does not fit in with the indubitable traits of Hal's nature. On one occasion, and on one occasion only, there is a faint suspicion of political sophistication. In the preceding play, Hotspur contributed to his own political ruin by a noble gesture of bravado. Too eager to await reinforcements, he joined immediate battle with the vaunt that the reduction of his forces

lends a lustre and more great opinion
A larger dare to our great enterprise.

As a moral attitude its effect is magnificent; as a political decision it is disastrous. But on a similar occasion, Henry V displays a like temper. When, on the night before Agincourt, Westmoreland wishes that they had but one ten thousand more recruits from England, Henry will have none of it.

The fewer men, the greater share of honour,
. . . Wish not a man from England.
God's peace, I would not lose so great an honour
As one man more methinks would share from me.

He exceeds Hotspur in moral generosity and in thirst for glory: he would even reduce the army he has:

Rather proclaim it, Westmoreland, through my host,
That he which hath no stomach to this fight,
Let him depart: his passport shall be made
And crowns for convoy put into his purse—

and all because

we would not die in that man's company
That fears his fellowship to die with us.

But his gesture does not lead to defeat. It is not in fact a proclamation and a firm offer to the army. It is merely a remark to one of his chiefs of staff. Nor would there have been much opportunity for wholesale demobilization on the very eve of battle. The offer, which was no offer, was either a piece of strategy or the natural outcome of Henry's military enthusiasm. Either his guardian spirit once more urges Henry to make what, in spite of first appearances, proves in the end to be the politic move, or Henry is sounder in the theory of military numbers than he appears in this speech to be. There is more of the general's acumen in another of his battle-prayers:

O God of battles, steel my soldiers' hearts,
Possess them not with fear; take from them now
The sense of reckoning, if the opposed numbers
Pluck their hearts from them.

Altogether, then, the play of *Henry V* does not really imply substantial modifications in Shakespeare's apprehension of the political life. There remains in it the sense that what is good in the world of politics is entirely unrelated to and generally the opposite of what makes for goodness in the moral life. It is the distinction between Machiavelli's *virtu* and the moralist's virtue, or, as Mr. G. B. Shaw puts it, between virtue and goodness. But more of that later. Henry IV achieves political greatness and proves his political worth by the deliberate exercise of his political acumen: whence our coldness to him as a man. To a large extent, Henry V is thrust into political greatness by sheer instinct. His genius leads him to take steps his moral nature would have prohibited his taking; and his ingratiating commonplaceness of mind hides from him their immoral implications or even glosses them with conventional moral sanctions. He is secured in our affections, because he is dispensed by Shakespeare from requiring such intellectual greatness as his father had. He stands before us always as the great plain man, and there is a sort of gratification felt by Shakespeare, as by most of us, in installing the plain man in high political office. Illogical, it probably is; a mere gamble with fate. We trust that a blind instinct will prompt the plain man to do those things the competent politician would clearly see to be necessary; and we are willing to take our chance, though at such very long odds against us, because, as human beings and unpolitical animals, we prefer to sacrifice the probability of good government to secure ourselves against the fear of exploitation by the expert. A pledge to do nothing at all is not without advantages as an electioneering cry. Henry V wins our hearts as the greatest of plain men. His common text is that the king is but a man; that all his senses have but human conditions, and that, his ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man. Note, however, how his guardian angel saw to it that he should preserve his incognito whilst preaching this sermon. Henry has all the admirable propensities of the average Englishman, his conventions, his manners, and his opportune lack of them, his prejudices, and even his faith. He would have welcomed Robinson Crusoe as a brother in God. In all except generalship, he is that most attractive and delightful being, the magnificent commonplace, and we needs must love the glorified image of ourselves.

Thus did Shakespeare sweeten the savour of the political life, without giving the lie to what he had apprehended of its sordid necessities. Though it may be largely hidden, the truth as Shakespeare grasped it, remains even in *Henry V*: the sense that not only is politics a nasty business, but that a repugnant unscrupulousness

is an invaluable asset in the art of government. That is the burden of the English History Plays, jubilant as they are in pride of country and of race.

But there is another, and a final, chapter to the story. There is *Julius Caesar*. Too often the Roman play is taken as a predecessor of *Hamlet* rather than as a successor of *Henry V*. Hence all the pother as to whether it is Caesar's tragedy, or Brutus's; and the consequent shifts to pad one or other of them into the shape and dimensions of a tragic hero. Nothing can raise Caesar to such a stature. Even his arrogance is palpably nearer to the ludicrousness of comedy than to the *hubris* of ancient tragedy, though doubtless it was Caesar's after-life in classical tragedy which suggested to Shakespeare the trait which best lent itself to the caricature his purpose required. Nor is Brutus really more amenable to the requirements of tragedy. Though Shakespeare is nearer to us than he is to Dante, for whom Brutus was Satan's chosen child, yet Shakespeare is not quite contemporary enough to assume that assassination is a virtue if only a muddle-headed notion of liberty is urged as its motive. It is impossible to fit *Julius Caesar* into Shakespeare's mode of tragedy; although it is natural to try to do so, since before Shakespeare, the Roman theme had never entered drama except as the stuff of tragedy. But Shakespeare occasionally ventured on artistic innovations. *Julius Caesar* is a history-play in exactly the same sense as are *Henry IV* and *Henry V*: that is, it is a political play.

It is the weakness of *Julius Caesar* as a history-play which really excites Mr. G. B. Shaw to wrath; and to find its generally accepted tragic imperfections in his indictment only means that when the game is Shakespeare-baiting, any sort of stick will do. But his serious complaint is its failure as a history-play. He has, however, a very curious notion that a history-play is a branch of science, not a form of art. The test of goodness he applies to it is its correspondence with recorded fact; it fails because Shakespeare's Caesar is quite unlike the man who was the Roman dictator. The assertion of Mr. Shaw the historian is as clearly right as the use of it by Mr. Shaw the critic is clearly irrelevant. Yet even on the point of fact he allows himself to lose something by a strange strategic blunder. Shakespeare's Caesar is not Julius Caesar, he holds, because it was not in Shakespeare to have an inkling of what the real Caesar was. That is an intelligible accusation. But then, 'it cost Shakespeare no pang to write Caesar down for the merely technical purpose of writing Brutus up' Mr. Shaw cannot have it both ways. He cannot adduce Shakespeare's portrait of Caesar as evidence that Shakespeare unsuccessfully tried to paint the real

Caesar, and also that, for purely theatrical and specious reasons, he did not try to paint the real Caesar. One or the other, maybe, but not both.

Perhaps Shakespeare is no less Shakespeare even though good grounds might be found to substantiate either of the charges as separate accusations. He certainly wrote Caesar down; that is, he drew a portrait in which he deliberately belittled the figure he found in Plutarch. But did he do so 'for the merely technical purpose of writing Brutus up?' And because he did so, is it to be safely concluded that it was not in Shakespeare to understand the rare type of man who is a Caesar.

It is perhaps not always remembered how very far down Shakespeare did write Caesar. His first words strike the key-note of the quality the dramatist is compelling him to assume. With the natural jester Casca to bluster as officious and unofficial usher, he uses the voice of majesty and the publicity of a ceremonial occasion for conveying to Calpurnia a gynaecological hint any ordinary fellow would have spoken of to his wife in the privacy of their dressing-room. This Caesar has been a consummate play-actor with the forum for his stage and the world for his theatre. But his mastery is failing him. He feels that the attitudes, the gestures, and the clichés are no longer as compelling as they were. Seeking to give them their former might, he exaggerates and over-acts them. He seizes all and every the most unsuitable occasion to try them out, to keep his hand in by rehearsing at every opportunity. The magnificent histrionic genius by which he has secured dominion over mankind now lacks its informing inspiration. Weakened by his fears, he himself is the slave of the theatrical technique he has hitherto employed as a born artist. He is as pathetic as a decrepit tragedian painfully strutting and squeakily mouthing it, as in the delirium of dotage he acts over again the triumphs of his prime. At times, his postures reflect something of the old glory, at moments his voice catches the old magisterial note. But the effort is always apparent, the striving to recover and maintain the pose. So after plainly revealing his fears to Antony, he pulls himself together:

I rather tell thee what is to be feared
Than what I fear.

and then to the most impressive of former postures: 'For always I am Caesar.' But the strain is too much; the attitude is no more than a moment's display. It shrivels into the tell-tale confession: 'Come on my right hand, for this ear is deaf.' If this is not a picture of Mommsen's Caesar, it is at least a possible portrait of the latter.

end of Shaw's Caesar. It shows him, not in the prime of his amorous gallivantings and conquering expeditions, but in the intimacies of his premature senility.

There is only one scene in which a more intimate and a domestic 'close-up' view of Caesar is shown. But it is a complete exposure of his character as it suited Shakespeare to present it. We are in the privacy of Caesar's home. It is midnight. There is incessant thunder and lightning. Caesar, who in the old military days could snatch an hour's sleep in any sort of a hole, cannot now rest even in his comfortable bed at the proper time of sleeping. He is pacing the corridors of his house, clad only in his nightgown. He is distraught: not perhaps quite as indifferent to risks of pneumonia as he seems, for in Shakespeare's English a nightgown is not a night-shirt, but a dressing-gown.. Still, Caesar is manifestly distraught. His teeth chatter, his hair stands on end, he is a nervous wreck. All, apparently, because his wife has had nightmare. He will have the priests' auguries at once, unable to possess himself in patience until the normal opening-hour of these distinguished civil servants' offices. Enter Calpurnia, who may have had nightmare, and indeed had ample warrant for it, but who, once properly awake, has all the *savoir-faire* and common-sense efficiency which Caesar lacks. She rules this failing giant with the knowing strategy, the tactful wheedling, and the no less absolute authority of a perfect nurse. She comes to him with a playful phrase—'going out, Caesar?' One must remember that it is midnight, a storm is raging, and Caesar shivers in a dressing-gown. Then the blunt ultimatum—'no going out to-day for you.' Caesar's reply is the most pathetic of his utterances in the whole play. Here he stands, consumed with fear, in the privacy of his own house, with no audience but his own wife, and he puts on the full pomp and all the bombast of his strongest forensic turn. 'Caesar shall forth . . .', and so on. Calpurnia (to whom incidentally no actress will ever do justice until the tradition of taking her for a weak, puling creature goes the way of all other anti-feminist prejudices) sees that his nerves are much worse than usual. Perhaps it will be better to humour him by playing up to his mood. So, to make success on the one important point certain, to ensure his staying indoors, she harrows him with fear, tactfully, but with no half-measure. Yet it is at moments of most obvious distress that Caesar tries his histrionic recoveries most pertinaciously:

What can be avoided
Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?
Yet Caesar shall forth, for these predictions
Are to the world in general as to Caesar.

His last line at once suggests to Calpurnia another mode of dealing with his mood: she plays up to his pride:

When beggars die, there are no comets seen;
The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes.

But Caesar is so far excited now that even customary sedatives fail. He still will go: 'Cowards die many times before their death', and he gathers himself into his most majestic posture:

Of all the wonders that I yet have heard
It seems to me most strange that men should fear,
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it will come.

But, unluckily for the success of the illusionist's turn, there is, so to speak, an accident. In the very moment of his announcing his superb indifference to mortal perturbations, there is a noise behind him. Turning with a start, he sees that it is merely his messenger: but with irrepressible excitement, this monument of supernatural placidity breathlessly blurts out—'What say the augurers?' (that is, is there really anything in my fears?) The augury is in fact bad. But Caesar now has not only a solitary listener; the addition of the messenger provides him with an audience. Fronting Calpurnia *and* the messenger, he can keep up his theatrical mannerisms:

Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he.
We are two lions litter'd in one day,
And I the elder and more terrible.

Unconscious burlesque never outdid itself more flagrantly. Calpurnia is driven to her subtlest counterstroke. By mere instinct she sees the way out: she gives Caesar the safe excuse she knows he will seize with avidity—

call it my fear,

That keeps you in the house, and not your own.

The victory is won. Without even the slightest pretence at saving appearances, Caesar jumps at the pretext:

Mark Antony shall say I am not well,
And for thy humour, I will stay at home.

But so far has he lost his cunning that now he cannot even relapse effectively. He destroys whatever semblance of sincerity his compliance to Calpurnia's fears had had by a fresh outbreak when Decius enters to fetch him to the senate-house. Not a word of his not being well, but some of his stagiest heroics:

'Tell them I will not come to-day;
Cannot is false; and that I dare not, falser.

Calpurnia, of course, recognizes the sublime silliness of it, and once more seeks to save the situation with the proper aside to Decius—

'say he is sick.' But Caesar has wound himself up for his tricks: 'shall Caesar send a lie?' No one is deluded; and Decius politely but firmly tells Caesar that he must offer a reason which at least sounds sensible. How wise Calpurnia was becomes even clearer; for exactly as she planned, Caesar now tells Decius that his real reason is Calpurnia's nerves. But Decius, who of course wants Caesar in the senate-house as much as Calpurnia wants him at home, tries to overcome Calpurnia's stratagems with her own device: he plays on Caesar's superstition. He succeeds—for Caesar is at the mercy of those who have the last word with him: 'you have well expounded' the omens. Nothing more is necessary but to push the appeal to Caesar's pride, and he gives in at once—but with a phrase which leaves him not a vestige of decency nor a shred of dignity: he puts all on to Calpurnia:

How foolish do your fears seem now, Calpurnia.
I am ashamed I did yield to them.

There is no doubt at all about it: Shakespeare wrote Caesar as far down as any traditional character could be written down. But why assume that he did it 'to write Brutus up'? His Brutus is not in fact, 'written up' in the same sense that Caesar is written down. That is, Plutarch's Brutus is at least as noble in soul as is Shakespeare's, whereas Shakespeare's Caesar is a pygmy to Plutarch's. Brutus is no more significant in the play than is Hotspur in *Henry IV*, and the parts of both in the dramatic economy are very similar. Why, then, do Shakespeare's portraits of an English and of a Roman ruler differ so greatly? England was in Shakespeare's blood; its past was his past, and its kings were the sacred instruments who had shaped its destiny. But what could Caesar possibly have been to him? What was Rome? For Shakespeare Rome was a chapter of the past, dead and done with this many a year, and now securely bound within the covers of Plutarch. Shakespeare could see it calmly, impersonally, and without racial prejudice. And the sight of it must have prompted a political idea which finds no place whatever in the English history-plays. Is it likely, indeed is it even possible, that any one man, merely by virtue of his superiority to other men, could ever have secured such dominion over mankind as Caesar secured? The interpretation of the fate of nations as the direct outcome of the personality of its governor, a view accepted instinctively and unquestioningly in the English histories, is palpably inadequate to account for Rome and the Empire. The course of civilization is determined, and, in *Julius Caesar*, mainly determined, by factors independent of a ruler's personality. Caesar the man and Caesar the politician are written down to zero in order that mightier and utterly impersonal forces

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may be shown in operation. The powers which are spontaneously generated when men group themselves or grow into societies, powers which only when they have prevailed are recognized and given names, discussed and documented as ideals or systems or principles, but which indeed are subtler, more mysterious, and mightier forces than the phase of them which can be analysed and labelled as political shibboleths: such irresistible and elusive influences, for instance, as the *Zeitgeist*, the notion which is borne down the wind, these are the instruments determining the fate of Rome as it is unrolled in *Julius Caesar*. Caesar is written down that Caesarism may be written up. *Julius Caesar* is Shakespeare's profoundest political or history play.

Hence, even more than do the English histories, it points to the inadequacy of the traditional title of the genre, the history-play. Such a title invites the irrelevant criticism that Caesar in the play does not correspond with Mommsen's. But how could he? The dramatist universalizes the particular; he presents the permanent elements behind the transitory features of a particular epoch, and to do so, he is perforce laying hold of what without straining words may properly be called the principles of government. A history-play is primarily a political play.

There is particular irony, therefore, in Mr. Shaw's attack on *Julius Caesar*. He blames Shakespeare for not apprehending the political world as a Carlylean product of his 'hero'. Shakespeare had in truth been grasping history exactly in that Carlylean way in all his English history-plays. In them, also, his sense of the historical 'hero', that is, the efficient politician, had been very close indeed, *mutatis mutandis*, to Mr. Shaw's notion of Caesar. Henry IV is not a Caesar; but, within the limits of his capacity, his ruling principles are precisely those attributed to Caesar by Mr. Shaw. 'Having virtue, he has no need of goodness.' 'He is neither frank, forgiving, nor generous.' In Mr. Shaw's sense, he is completely selfish; that is, he allows neither prejudice nor creed nor ideal to interrupt him in doing each moment exactly what his political cunning sees to be expedient. Shakespeare's early governors are almost incredibly Shavian. His Caesar is not. But that is because in the meantime Shakespeare's political apprehension had widened. And so we have the amusing situation of an inveterate individualist like Shakespeare being castigated for seeing history socialistically, by a socialist who insists that history is entirely made by individuals. However, as generally happens when an author is really an artist, his preface is of no moment and his plays are the thing. Shaw's criticism of Shakespeare's Caesar is neither here nor there: his *Caesar and Cleopatra* is ample compensation for his heresy.



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